

STILL ON Airmen provide nation's strategic umbrella TARGET

By Staff Sgt. Jeremy Larlee

The ghosts of generations of military members whisper throughout F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Wyo.

Formed as Fort D.A. Russell in 1867, renamed Fort Francis E. Warren in 1930 and then given its current name when the Army handed the base over to the Air Force in 1947, the base has seen its capabilities transition radically over the years.

The installation began as a frontier cavalry unit that protected the railroad. It gave security to people as manifest destiny drove them westward looking for their piece of the American dream.

Some 140 years later, some of the base's frontier-days appearances have not changed. Many buildings at the installation are now on historical registers and are older than the state of Wyoming, which didn't join the Union until 1890.

But visitors shouldn't be fooled by the well-worn look, because the base now has a mission vital to the protection of the entire country, said Col. Michael Morgan, vice commander of the 90th Space Wing.

"When you come through the main gate, you see beautiful red brick homes and lanes lined with trees," he said. "But behind all that are missiles that pack one heck of a wallop. You would never know that by looking in from outside the gate."

Team effort

The base is home to one of three missile wings in the Air Force. Their weapon of choice is the Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile, or ICBM.

"The efforts of the personnel are vital to the

First Lt. Matthew Bejcek (left) and Capt. Mark Olenick keep watch over the missile alert facility launch control center around the clock, three days at a time. They cycle out with other members of the 319th Missile Squadron.

Airmen at F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Wyo., are upholding a long tradition and heritage that dates to the Army posts of the old frontier days. From this historical base — which still has homes and offices dating back to the late 1800s — they operate missile alert facilities that help protect the United States.

defense of the nation and an important resource of this command,” said Gen. Kevin P. Chilton, commander of Air Force Space Command. “Our ICBM force provides that strategic umbrella for our nation and that doesn’t happen by accident, the Airmen are out there every day doing the job.”

One of those Airmen, 1st Lt. Matthew Bejcek, is a deputy combat crew member with the 319th Missile Squadron. He works at a missile alert facility in the rural Wyoming countryside an hours drive from the base.

Every morning, the lieutenant faces a long drive to work over deserted country roads, and 90 minutes of security checks before he can start work.

Working more than 60 feet underground, his job is more difficult than simply monitoring a mythical big red button. There are checklists to go through during his shift, and he usually has a headset to his ear, coordinating actions throughout the missile field.

The job can be quite hectic, but it is easier because of the close bond the lieutenant has with his crew partner, Capt. Mark Olenick. They have been a team since November.

“It is a very unique position down here,” the lieutenant said. “From the beginning, we just seemed to click. There are times that we get into a rhythm, and just a couple of words are needed for him to know what is going on.”

Teamwork between crew members is essential because of the cramped work area, nicknamed “the capsule” because it resembles pill capsule. There is space for only two chairs, a few monitors and twin-sized bunks.

The Airmen are not so concerned with the creature comforts of their work space. They know they have a very serious mission.

But if the crew ever had to launch their deadly missiles, it is a more complicated process than just “pushing a button.” They would have to work together through numerous checklists and turn their individual keys simultaneously.

It is an action Lieutenant Bejcek hopes he will never have to perform. But he goes to work each day, ready to carry out the orders to launch, if directed.

That’s why missile duty can be lonely work. But the crew is not alone. Their capsule is

not the only part of a missile alert facility. Above ground is a compound that houses a support staff and a robust security forces unit trained to defend the compound and others like it spread across Wyoming, Colorado and Nebraska.

Vital security

Tech. Sgt. Paul Bobenmoyer is a missile alert facility manager. It is a special-duty assignment and he has found it to be a lot different than his former duties as a C-130 Hercules

engine mechanic.

As a facility manager, he has a part to play in nearly every facet of the mission. On a daily basis, he can find himself calling for maintenance help or dealing with animals tripping sensors around the facility.

“You dabble in everything as a facility manager,” he said. “You have to have basic knowledge about the systems, in case something goes wrong so you can fix it or call in the proper assistance.”

Because of the mission, security at the compound is extremely tight. Crews must pass

through several levels of security checks before they get to their capsule.

Security forces get special training to work at the facilities. One class is at Camp Guernsey, a small, modest National Guard base about a two-hour drive north of F.E. Warren. The training is vital in the protection of the site and its missiles, said Maj. Joseph Gallagher, commander of the 90th Ground Combat Training Course.

The contents of the course are a product of collaboration between some of the most experienced security forces in the world, the

major said.

“If you train continuously, when bad things happen, you will be ready,” he said.

Recapitalizing the tool box

The training is part of the command’s effort to upgrade all its capabilities.

“This is an exciting time to be in Air Force Space Command, because we are recapitalizing every system in the command right now,” General Chilton said.

Out on the prairies, there are major projects

underway to upgrade launch facilities. One is to change the “B-Plug.” This is a large concrete and metal security door used to seal the entrance to a launch facility in case of an attack. The method of deployment — an electro-mechanical actuator — had not changed much since the 1950s. An upgrade now lets the door deploy in seconds instead of minutes.

The level of caution is an inherent part of the nuclear mission, Colonel Morgan said.

“When it comes to operating nuclear weapons, you have to put your ‘A game’ on each and



Illustration by G. Patrick Harris



photo by Senior Airman Javier Cruz Jr.

This Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile training tool helps teach new Airmen to the 90th Space Wing the job they will do for Air Force Space Command. The training site is a realistic replica of the 150 missile alert facilities the wing operates throughout Wyoming, western Nebraska and northern Colorado.



photo by Senior Airman Javier Cruz Jr.

Security forces Airmen (above) prepare to enter a room to deal with a hostage situation during a special training session at Camp Guernsey, Wyo. Security forces go there for convoy security, sniper and close quarters combat training provided by the 90th Ground Training Squadron. Missile alert facility manager Tech. Sgt. Paul Bobenmoyer (right) enters a missile facility through the thick blast door that protects the launch control center. The sergeant is with the 319th Missile Squadron.

every day,” he said. “The president requires a number of tools in his toolbox. I would submit that we are the sledgehammer — and there are times that you may need a sledgehammer.”

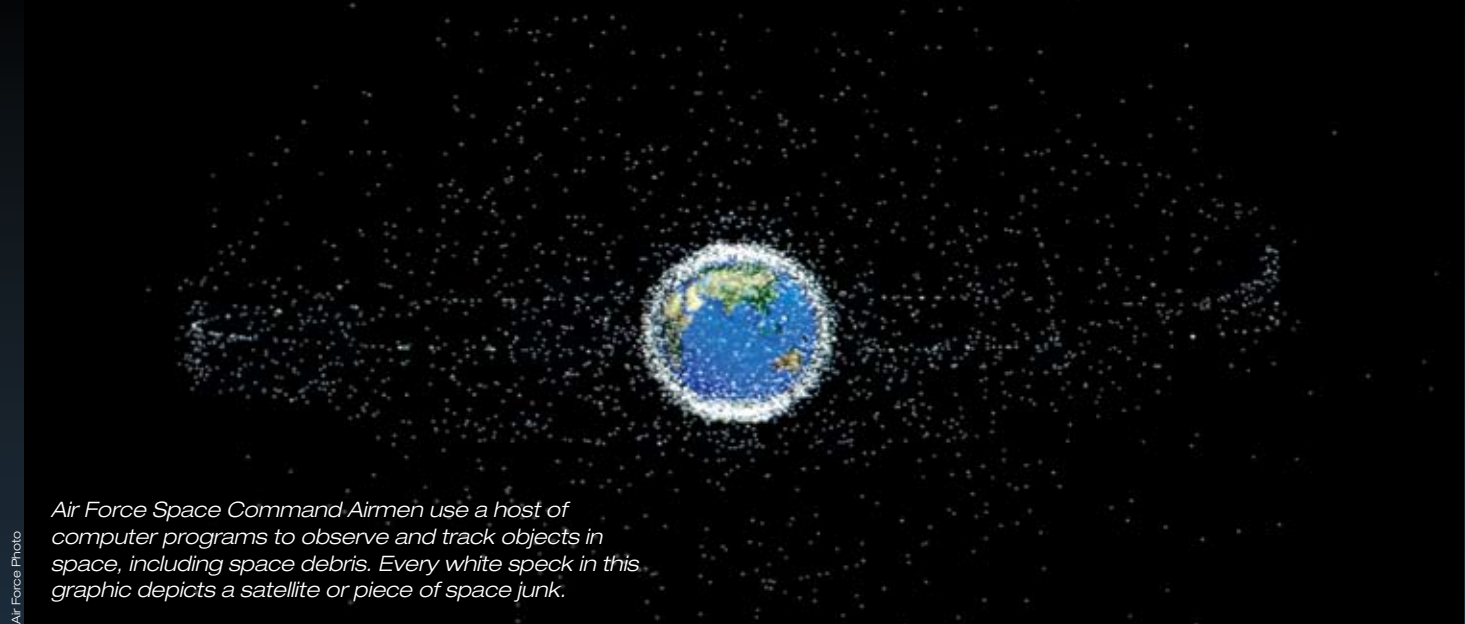
Living by the sledgehammer

For some people, like Paula Taylor, living around the ICBM “sledgehammer” is a way of life.

Ms. Taylor is the director of the Warren ICBM/Heritage Museum and has an in depth knowledge of the history of the base and its missile mission. She is now a fifth-generation Wyomian born in 1959 — one year after the start of the ICBM mission at F.E. Warren.

She said people often ask her if she is scared to live in an area of the country with so many missiles. She tells them the weapons have always been a part of her life. She also thinks that even though the tools have changed from horses to missiles, some things never change.

“Our mission has not changed from 1867,” she said. “Our duty then was to protect Americans, and today, we are doing the same mission with the ICBMs.” 🦅



Air Force Photo

Air Force Space Command Airmen use a host of computer programs to observe and track objects in space, including space debris. Every white speck in this graphic depicts a satellite or piece of space junk.

Space’s new future is bright

The Airmen of Air Force Space Command are tracking a lot more than the man-made space junk that orbits the Earth.

Space operators are also busy trying to improve the way they do business. They’re focusing on improving their capabilities — which most Americans know little about — to better provide information to troops on the battlefield.

Leading the effort are leaders with experience in real-world combat operations. These men and women know how to work with their sister services to ensure servicemembers on the ground get the best air and space support needed to win the war on terrorism. Every day, these combat Airmen help joint forces achieve the best possible spherical situational awareness.

The commander of these space Airmen, Gen. Kevin P. Chilton, is a longtime space operator. The command is modernizing its capabilities and technologies and fixating on the details to make the services second to none. He said the command is focusing on several key areas.

“First we need to be preserve and develop new capabilities the joint warfighter relies on. Second, we have to provide a nuclear deterrent with our ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] force,” the general said. “Third, unlike other commands, we have an acquisition responsibility. So we are focusing on making sure we develop, acquire and field the necessary capabilities we need for the future.

“Underpinning this is our need for talented people,” he said.

So as the command heads into a more clearly defined future, it is concentrating on recruiting, training and retaining “the talent we need to run our space systems in the future,” he said.

That is a key strategy for fighting the continuing war on terrorism, a battle in which command Airmen are deeply involved each day. Space operators bring global positioning system navigation and timing to worldwide joint fight. They also provide global control and communications and weather data and missile warning with an arsenal of satellites.

The command has some immediate goals, though it will continue to face challenges, he said.

“Many of the goals we are paying close attention to are what we call space situational awareness,” he said. “We need to have a better understanding of what is up in space.”

The command is doing a good job of cataloging objects orbiting the Earth, he said. But the command need a better understanding of just what the object are, the capabilities of the satellites in space and the intent of the satellite users.

“The recent Chinese anti-satellite test really put an exclamation

point on this requirement for the future,” the general said. “After we understand the situational awareness up there and develop that, we need to also focus on how we can command and control our assets so they can be responsive to any threat that may appear.”

Getting to that point means facing change involving recapitulation and acquisition. But the general said his Airmen are up to the challenges and this will make for some exiting times ahead.

“We are recapitalizing every system in the command,” General Chilton said. “Right now every satellite system — whether it’s a weather, communications, missile warning or GPS satellite — is being recapitalized. We are developing brand new ones and we are launching some of those satellites this year.”

The command is looking deep into the future to develop satellites that won’t go into service for several years, but that will help with

space surveillance. And the command is also recapitalizing the Air Force’s entire ICBM force, essentially rebuilding the Minuteman III missile system deployed in the field.

These are very important programs for the nation and the general said it is “essential that we continue to fund these as we move forward.”

Getting the funds needed to recapitalize means making lawmakers and the American public more aware of the command’s capabilities. Doing that is a

dedicated cadre of Airmen doing a task most people don’t know about — space command missions. It’s a job space Airmen should be proud of, the general said.

“We require them to train and be proficient in what they do — but they are in the fight 24-7,” the general said. “On top of that, our ICBM force provides that strategic umbrella for our nations and that doesn’t happen by accident. They are out there everyday doing the job.”

But it’s the payoff of having a viable space command that makes it capabilities worth their weight in gold to the command’s customers.

“Nothing we do in Air Force Space Command is for Air Force Space Command,” General Chilton said. “Everything we do is for the joint fight.”

That’s why the general said he want everyone to know and have the confidence to turn to the command for “anything space.” Space Airmen have capabilities that run the gamut from systems development, acquisition fielding and actual operations to the launch of ICBMs, missile warning, space surveillance and a host of key satellite systems.

“We have the expertise for America in Air Force Space Command,” he said. “If you have a question about space, we should be at the top of your Rolodex.”

— Louis A. Arana-Barradas